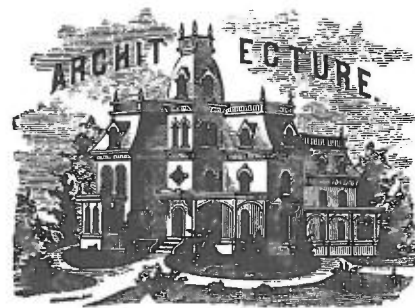


A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Gershom Flagg
1705-1771

Of the men who designed and constructed the buildings of Pre-Revolutionary Maine, Gershom Flagg of Boston stands out as one of the few whose career is well documented. During a span of approximately two decades, Flagg played an important role in the building of five forts, a courthouse, and a residence.

Born in Boston on April 20, 1705, Gershom Flagg was the fourth of John and Abiah Kornic Flagg's nine children. His mother died in 1715. Two years later his father acquired a house on Hanover Street, in which the family resided until he died in 1732. Upon the elder Flagg's death, Gershom gained title to the Hanover Street property by paying the other heirs their respective portions of its appraised value.¹

Purchasing his father's Boston residence at the age of 27 would indicate that Gershom Flagg had progressed rapidly to establish himself as a housewright and glazier. Two years before, he had married Lydia Callender, the daughter of a Baptist minister, whose religious faith he shared. When she died without issue, he married Hannah Pitson in 1736.² The noted Colonial artist Robert Feke painted the couple's portraits along

with those of two of their seven children. The handsome likenesses of Gershom and Hannah Flagg, made during the 1740s, are now in the collection of the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut.

Feke depicted Flagg just at the time that the Boston housewright had been involved in his first project on the Maine frontier, the reconstruction of Fort Richmond on the Kennebec River. As English settlers penetrated inland during the later Indian wars, Fort Richmond was built in 1719 facing the head of Swan Island for the purpose of protecting settlements on the lower Kennebec and Merrymeeting Bay. Enlarged in 1723, this fortification was extensively rebuilt between 1740 and 1743. Most of the work was accomplished under the direction of Captain John Storer, a Wells master builder. It included a new stockade, a barracks, and a truckhouse with a gunroom. Gershom Flagg's role was that of glazier, for which Storer paid him 14 pounds, 19 shillings, 8 pence on November 5, 1741.³ Current archaeological excavations, sponsored by the Maine Historic Preservation Commission and the Fort Western Museum, are beginning to define the physical characteristics of Fort Richmond, a complex of which no surviving plan is known to exist.

At the end of the decade Flagg substantially strengthened his ties to Maine by purchasing a half share in the newly formed Kennebec Purchase Company. In his book *The Kennebec Proprietors, 1749-1775*, Gordon E. Kershaw provides the following description of this highly influential undertaking:

The Kennebec Purchase Company came into being in 1749, when an association of Boston merchant-speculators revived interest in an old Pilgrim grant on the Kennebec River in Maine. Organizing as "The Proprietors of the Kennebec Purchase from the late Colony of New-Plymouth", they proceeded to develop their tract during the twenty-five years preceding the Revolution. As claimants to a patent encompassing approximately three thousand square miles, they were "great proprietors" indeed, functioning on the grand scale... Dazzled by the opportunity to engross large amounts of land, they pushed back the wilderness as they built two forts and a courthouse, planted a dozen towns, settled hundreds of families on the Kennebec, and created landed estates for themselves.⁴

In January, 1752, Dr. Sylvester Gardiner, William Bowdoin, and Gershom Flagg were appointed by the Company to form a committee "to Settle and Regulate the Town of Frankfort on the Kennebec River..."⁵ This group was later expanded into a "Committee of Ten" and included all of the major shareholders.



Figure 1. Fort Western, Augusta, 1988 view by Richard W. Cheek.

As the builder member of the Company's settlement committee, Gershom Flagg was probably responsible for erecting Fort Frankfort, shortly to be renamed Fort Shirley. The first building campaign in 1752 resulted in a stockade and at least one blockhouse. Two years later at the outbreak of French and Indian hostilities, a 32 by 60 foot barracks was added.⁶ Funded by the Maine Historic Preservation Commission and the Lincoln County Cultural and Historical Association, archaeological survey and foundation restoration in 1987 at Pownalborough Court House uncovered parts of the western and southern palisades of Fort Shirley. Continuing archaeology on the site is being conducted by Bates College.

To further protect the emerging settlements of the Kennebec River valley, Governor William Shirley of Massachusetts ordered in 1754 that two new forts be constructed, Fort Western at Cushnoc, now Augusta, and Fort Halifax at Teconnett Falls, now Winslow. The former was financed by the Kennebec Purchase Company, while the latter was underwritten by Massachusetts.

The Company's Fort Shirley building committee was placed in charge of constructing Fort Western, and Gershom Flagg received the contract to carry out the work. His articles of agreement, signed on May 7, 1754, provided that he would receive five shillings per day and authorized him to leave the site for periodic supervision of the Fort Halifax project.⁷

As originally erected by Flagg, Fort Western consisted of a large two story barracks and storehouse protected

by blockhouses at alternate corners (Figure 1). Two small "watch boxes" were built at the other corners. Inner and outer palisades connected and covered the four strong points and enclosed the barracks. A large-scale program of archaeological excavations, co-sponsored in 1983 by the Maine Historic Preservation Commission, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the City of Augusta, and the University of Maine at Augusta, led to the uncovering of the 1754 trenches for the fort's palisades, indicating that Flagg constructed the complex according to his contract.

The remaining element from this scheme is the impressive barracks building, which still stands on the Kennebec River at the center of today's Augusta. Its exterior simplicity is echoed on the interior by tongue-in-groove panelled walls and huge fireplaces. Only in the officers' quarters appear such Georgian features as fireplace moldings and window seats. In 1987 the City of Augusta, using both documentary and archaeological evidence, reconstructed the entire complex to return Fort Western's surviving main building to its proper historical context.

Despite its utilitarian appearance, Fort Western proved a costly undertaking for the Kennebec Purchase Company. Gershom Flagg's charge for the main building, blockhouses, flankers, palisades, main gate, doors, shutters, and dormers was 215 pounds. Equipment, provisions, and the labor of carpenters, headed by Gershom Flagg, Jr., amounted to 74 pounds. Young Flagg's bill for doors, dormers, and interior finish carpentry came to 179 pounds. In addition, Samuel

Oldham, the mason, submitted a 192-pound bill for foundation walls, chimneys, and plastering.⁸

Equally as remarkable as the survival of the Fort Western barracks was the preservation of the Fort Halifax blockhouse, which stood for 233 years until it was swept away by the great flood of April 1, 1987. Located at the confluence of the Kennebec and Sebasticook Rivers, this plain log structure was all that remained above ground of a smaller, less complex wooden fortification than the one at Augusta. Unlike Fort Shirley and Fort Western, Gershom Flagg was not directly involved in the design and construction of Fort Halifax. The building campaign of 1754 set out to create a large-scale fort which was planned by Major General John Winslow. This plan was extensively altered and completed in 1755 under the direction of Captain William Lithgow. The actual work was carried out by the Falmouth master builder Isaac Ilsley, assisted by his crew of twelve carpenters and soldiers from the fort. Flagg's role in the project was confined to providing his experienced supervision to Ilsley and his workmen.⁹

Archaeological excavations, co-sponsored by the Maine Historic Preservation Commission and the Maine Bureau of Parks and Recreation, were undertaken in 1987 to study colonial period deposits beneath the site of the last blockhouse prior to its reconstruction. Among other things, the project uncovered the 1755 palisade lines which abutted two contiguous sides of the blockhouse, proving that it had never been moved during its 233-year history.

Continuing unrest between the British and the allied French and Indians brought Gershom Flagg back to Maine in 1759 to build his last and most ambitious frontier fortification, Fort Pownal at the mouth of the Penobscot River. An unsigned drawing in the Library of Congress reveals that Fort Pownal's design was exceptional for its time and place. Instead of the familiar stockade with diagonally-opposed blockhouses, one massive blockhouse with its own bastions was built on substantial fieldstone footings. Surrounding this was a palisade, ditch, and earthworks in a four-pointed star form. The use of this remarkable plan is confirmed by early descriptions as well as by recent aerial photographs and archaeological investigations conducted in the 1960s by the Maine Bureau of Parks and Recreation.

Although Flagg's part in designing Fort Pownal remains uncertain, his role as its master builder is clear. In the spring of 1759, Governor Thomas Pownal sailed with three hundred men from Boston to Falmouth to make preparations for establishing his coastal fort. Attached to this expedition were Gershom Flagg and his crew, who prefabricated the parts for the blockhouse while in Falmouth. These were loaded on a vessel which shortly followed the departure of the Governor's fleet on May 8, 1759. Flagg stopped for lime for mortar at St. George and arrived with his crew and materials at the Penobscot on May 21st. Wasting no time, he and his men completed the fort on July 6th, perhaps due in part to the pre-cut pieces which they were using. Their handiwork would last only until July of 1775,

when a Continental regiment destroyed the blockhouse to prevent its use by the British.¹⁰

Gordon Kershaw ascribes the following significance to Fort Pownal:

The building of Fort Pownal symbolized the end of an era of conflict on the Maine frontier. Once the structure was operational, the Massachusetts legislature was besieged with prospective settlers who wanted to take up land on the Penobscot. Kennebec lands also increased in demand. The long-awaited capture of Quebec on September 13, 1759, several months after the completion of Fort Pownal made the latter's very existence unnecessary. The "glorious year", 1759, put an end to the fear of the French in British North America and, in New England, to the fear of their Indian allies as well.¹¹

This dramatic change in the course of New England history is reflected in Gershom Flagg's final Maine commissions. After working on five forts between 1741 and 1759, the fruits of peace would be a courthouse in 1761 and a house the following year.

On July 21, 1760, the General Court of Massachusetts approved a bill to establish two new counties in Maine. The Falmouth area in southern Maine became Cumberland County, while Maine from the Kennebec River valley east to Canada was designated as Lincoln County, with the county seat as Pownalborough.

Perched on the bank of the Kennebec River in Dresden, Pownalborough Court House is the oldest surviving judicial building in Maine (Figure 2). It is symbolic of the Kennebec Proprietors' urge to have the seat of the new county within their domains, in that the company in 1760 undertook to assume the entire cost of construction. The price was to be substantial, and Gershom Flagg was to be the builder. According to Kershaw:

Gershom Flagg's bill to the Kennebeck proprietors totalled 546 pounds, a large sum for this period, and only for the shell of the building at that. One huge chimney, several fireplaces, and the plastering of a few rooms had been completed, but much remained to be done. A second chimney and the rest of the interior work was finished by Samuel Oldham under the direction of Jonathan Reed, resident proprietor, in 1769. These improvements added up to 101 pounds.¹²

Flagg was to erect a substantial post-and-beam building, 44 by 45 feet in size with a hip roof and three full stories. Ultimately, two huge chimneys would provide twelve fireplaces for thirteen rooms. Not surprisingly, the contract was specific in terms of the courtroom itself:

...one room upon the second story of forty-five feet long and twenty feet wide in said house shall be fitted with Boxes, Benches Judged needful for a Court house...¹³

The Pownalborough Court House went into use as soon as its roof was completed. On September 12, 1761, Gershom Flagg noted that on the ninth of that month he "had the House well Covered and Shingled on the top and Covered over the lower floor with one ruff Board putt up Seats table etc. proper to receive the Court which Enter'd the Same in procession." He added that the "Chief Judge with the Rest of the Gentry Drank the Company's health and wish'd all well."¹⁴



Figure 2. Pownalborough Court House, Dresden, 1988 view by Richard W. Cheek.

In addition to its legal function, Pownalborough Court House also served as an inn and tavern under the stewardship of Samuel Goodwin, one of the Kennebec Proprietors. When the county seat was transferred permanently to Wiscasset in 1794, Goodwin acquired the property which his descendants owned until 1954. At that point the Lincoln County Cultural and Historical Association, led by pioneer preservationist Mildred Burrage, purchased the building, thus once again giving the public access to the Court House.

Among those attracted to the new county seat at Pownalborough was the young attorney Jonathan Bowman, a Harvard graduate of 1755 and a nephew of the powerful Thomas Hancock of Boston. It is believed that Hancock's influence with the General Court resulted in Bowman's appointments as Collector of Excise, Register of Probate, Register of Deeds, Clerk of the Court of Sessions and the Court of Common Pleas, and Justice of the Peace for Lincoln County.¹⁵

Appropriate to his new station, Bowman commissioned Gershom Flagg to build him a fine house on the Kennebec River a short distance below the Pownalborough Court House (Figure 3). Constructed a year after Pownalborough Court House in 1762, the elegance of the Bowman House reveals Flagg as a truly talented Colonial designer and builder. The house is a classic of Georgian symmetry in both its exterior elevations and its interior floor plans. Handsome exterior pedi-

mented doorways and enframed windows are complemented by a grand central stairhall flanked on either side by richly panelled rooms (Figure 4). Here is a rare view of the beauty and quality of Flagg's work which must have brought him such early professional success in Boston.

With the completion of the Bowman House, Gershom Flagg's Maine projects drew to a close. When he returned to Boston in 1762, less than a decade of his career in that community remained. Records of the 1760s provide us with such glimpses of his work as shingling the tower of King's Chapel and performing glazing there as well as a commission from John Hancock, possibly for repairs on the Hancock Mansion, which stood adjacent to the present Massachusetts State House.¹⁶

In 1769 Flagg moved his family to a small rented country estate in Harvard, Massachusetts. There he was residing on March 23, 1771, when he died suddenly at the Brattle Tavern on School Street in Boston, probably of a heart attack.¹⁷ At the age of 66, Flagg was interred in the Old Granary Burying Ground on Tremont Street amid the remains of Boston's leading 17th and 18th century families. Over his grave was placed a large slate stone upon which was carved a Georgian door enframement comprised of fluted pilasters and a broken scroll pediment with a pineapple at its center (Figure 5). Above this doorway appears the tools of his trade,

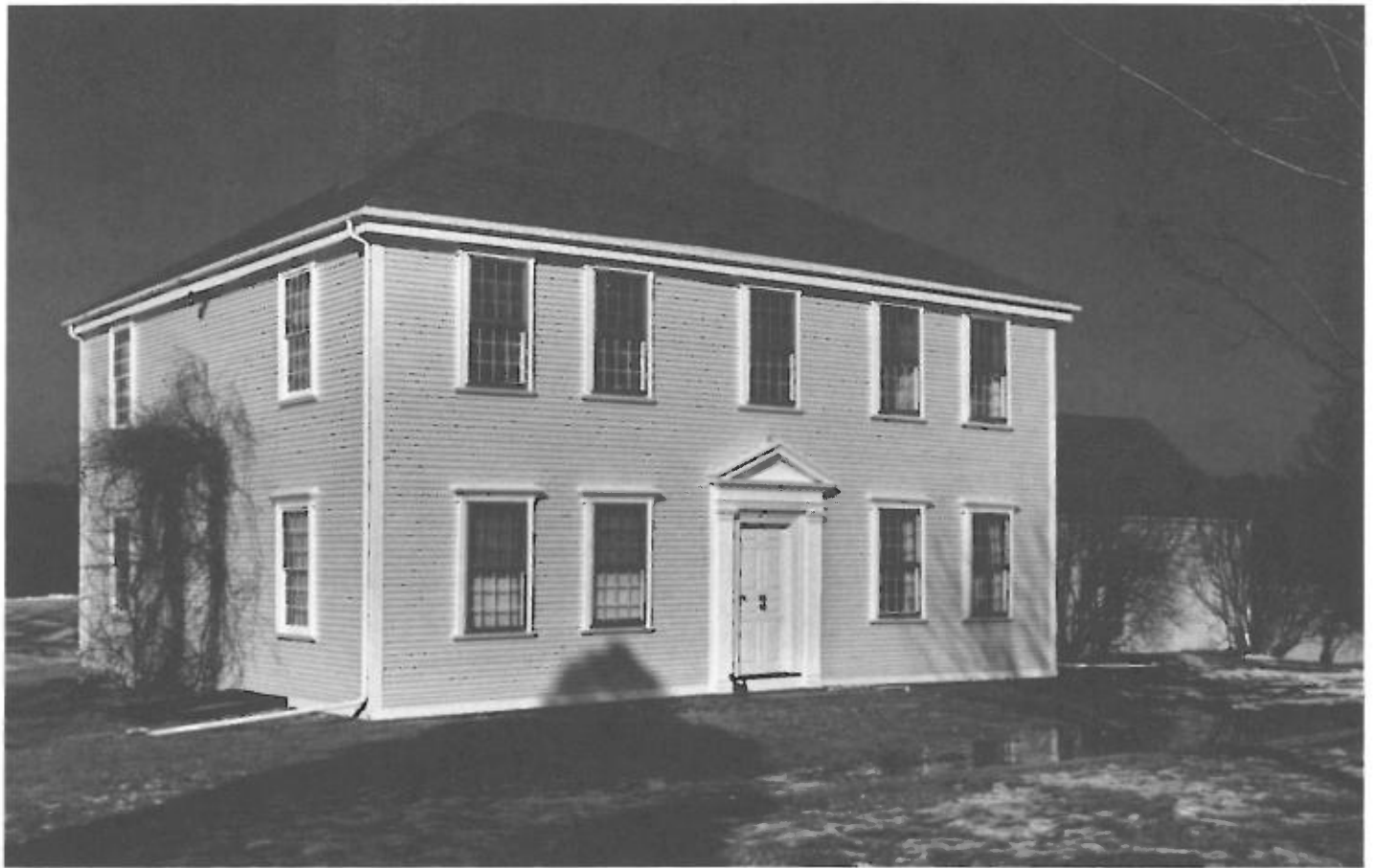


Figure 3. Jonathan Bowman House, Dresden, 1988 view by Richard W. Cheek.

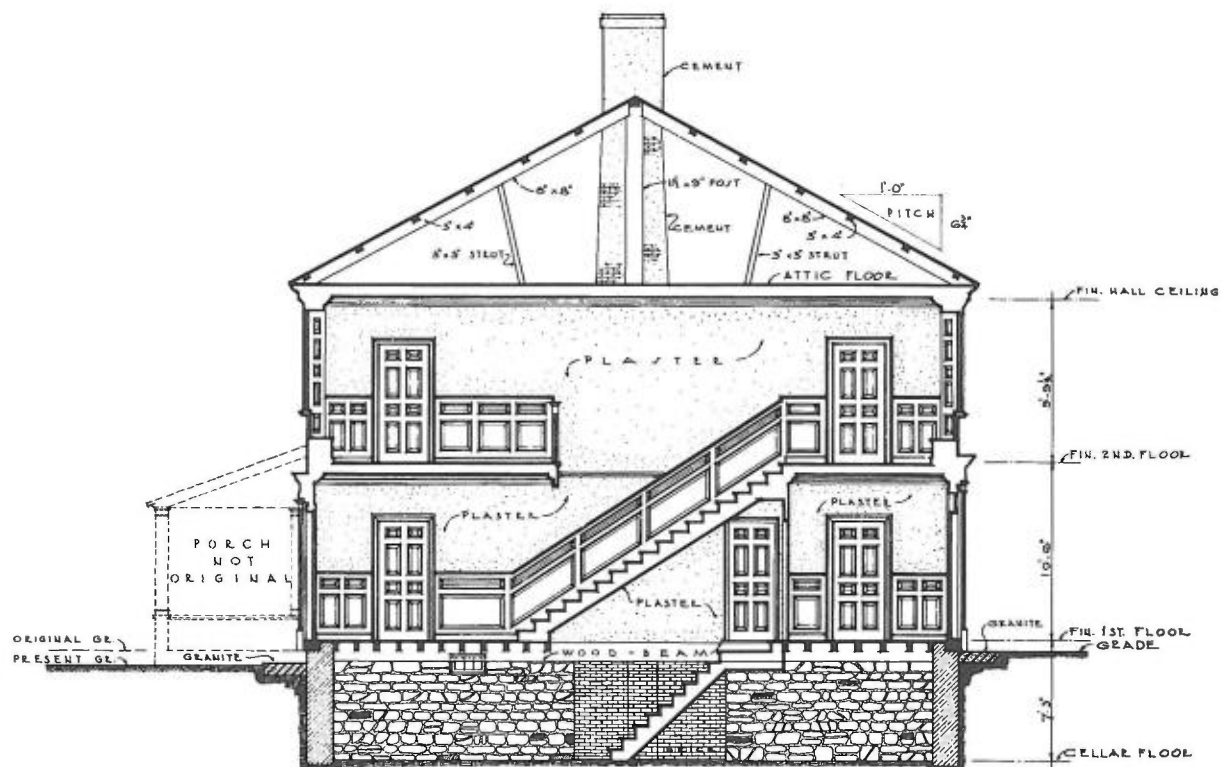


Figure 4. Transverse Section of the Jonathan Bowman House, Dresden (Courtesy of Historic American Buildings Survey, Library of Congress).

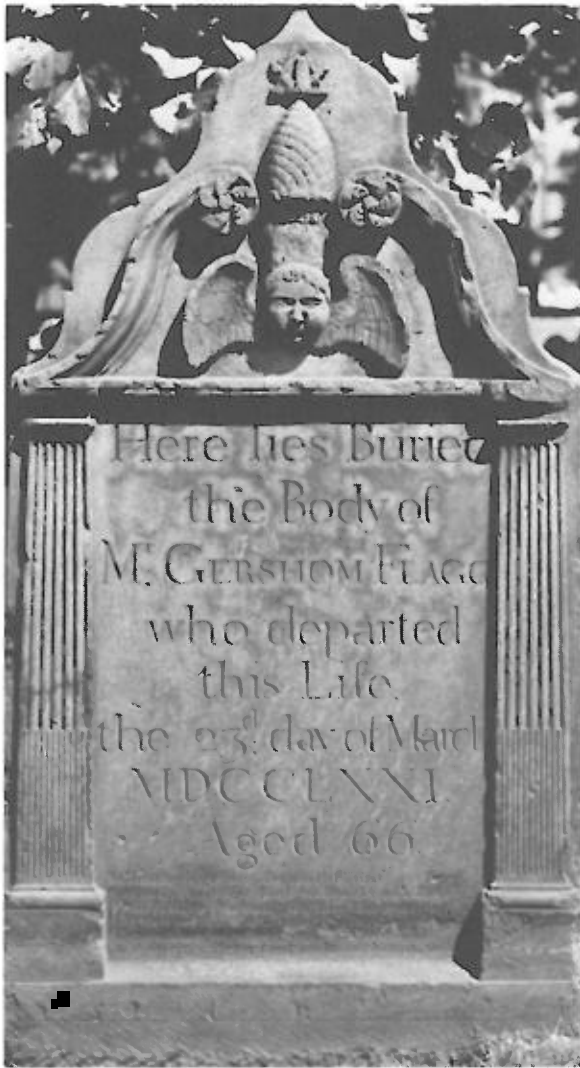


Figure 5. Gershom Flagg's Gravestone, Old Granary Burying Ground, Boston, 1988 view by Richard W. Cheek.

the square, rule, and compass, which are also the Masonic symbols. Below Flagg's inscription is the following verse:

To Limits fixed, our destined course we bend,
And with resistless haste, to Death's pale empire tend;
From Scene to Scene, our shifting moments go,
And then return the ground the dust we owe;
Virtue alone, unmoved can bear the Call,
And face the Stroke which makes all Nature fall.

Indeed, it is the virtue of Gershom Flagg's accomplishments as an architect-builder in Colonial Maine that

we continue to admire more than two centuries after his death. Amid the "shifting moments" of his life and times, he produced Fort Western, the Pownalborough Court House and the Bowman House. Now prized and cared for by deeply committed institutions and individuals, these three Maine buildings are his enduring legacy.

Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr.

NOTES

- ¹ James W. North, *The History of Augusta*, Augusta, 1870, pp. 292-293, 856-859.
- ² *Ibid.*
- ³ Memorandum of Sundrys supplied Capt. John Storer for the Rebuilding Richmond Fort by John Minot, September 20, 1742, Maine Historical Society, Portland.
- ⁴ Gordon E. Kershaw, *The Kennebec Proprietors*, Portland, 1975, xiv.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.
- ⁷ Articles of Agreement between Gershom Flagg and the Kennebec Proprietors, May 7, 1754, Kennebec Proprietors Papers, Maine Historical Society.
- ⁸ Kershaw, *op. cit.*, p. 131.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- ¹³ Kennebec Purchase Papers, Records, Vol. 2, pp. 268-270, Maine Historical Society.
- ¹⁴ Gershom Flagg to David Jeffries, September 12, 1761, Jeffries Papers, Maine Historical Society.
- ¹⁵ Kershaw, *op. cit.*, p. 165.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- ¹⁷ North, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY GERSHOM FLAGG

Fort Shirley, Dresden, 1752-54, Destroyed
Fort Western, Augusta, 1754, Extant and Restored
Fort Pownal, Stockton Springs, 1759, Destroyed
Pownalborough Court House, Dresden, 1761, Extant
Jonathan Bowman House, Dresden, 1762, Extant

Portrait of Gershom Flagg by Robert Feke
Courtesy of Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, Connecticut

Volume V, Number 9, 1988

Published by the
Maine Historic Preservation Commission
55 Capitol Street, Augusta, Maine 04333

Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., Editor
Roger G. Reed, Associate Editor

This publication has been financed in part with federal funds from the National Park Service, Department of the Interior.